one of these days (i'll be done with regret)
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one of these days (i'll be done with regret)

by iphigenias

Summary

He wonders what Buck would say if he told him any of that. If he told him all of it. If he said, “Buck, sometimes, I’ll close my eyes to think of a broad and I land on you.”

If he said, “Buck, we ain’t even seen the war but you’re already the best part of it.”

Notes

Hi, hello, hi!!!!!!!!! I am so excited to be writing for hbo war again (sorta), please accept this unfortunately dreadfully sad thing with the promise I hope to write happier things in the future! Things I googled for this fic: when was club soda invented (in the 1700s), can you see the other side of lake michigan (not unless you're right at the bottom or the top), manitowoc weather march (cold), what was army bedding made out of ww2 (hard to determine, sources suggested woolen blanket but this seemed cruel in texas), was jump rope popular 1940s america (yes, probably not in the army but let's all forgive and forget), buck up buttercup quote origin (apparently ww2 pilots who had to suck up their vomit from their mask so they didn't choke on it, this was pretty unverified though and extremely disgusting), is wyoming midwest (no).

As always: fic is based on the apple tv, callum turner and austin butler fictionalised portrayals of the men of the 100th. Absolutely no disrespect is intended toward the real men who served.

Title is from orville peck: "One of these days I'll be done with regret / Didn't think it would take me this long." Come say hi on tumblr!

Edit: HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAY I CAN'T BELIEVE I ACCIDENTALLY POSTED THIS ON YOUR BIRTHDAY

See the end of the work for more notes

It takes John a moment to register the rhythmic thumping sound as having nothing to do with the whiskey headache that wakes him, nauseated and uncomfortable, in the small hours of Sunday morning. It takes him another moment to crack open his eyes, so sticky with sleep they feel almost glued together, and stare at the silver-grey ceiling of the barracks until the world stops spinning and he can make out the distant struts of the roof; can feel the scratch of army-issued cotton bedding against his bare arms. The sound congeals in his ears and then splits in two, a strange whipping noise through the air outside, punctuated by the tell-tale thump of trainers on wet grass. Had it rained last night? John remembers in pieces, though it gets a little hazy after midnight. There was music, he thinks. A piano in the bar and someone… some girl? Laughing as she played, John belting tunelessly by her side.

"God," he says, to himself more than anyone else, as he rolls over and presses his forehead into the flat pillow. He wills his stomach to calm. The sound outside continues—*whip, thump, whip, thump*—and quickly merges with the throb in John's temples, alternating left and right. "God," he says again, and checks his watch on the floor beside his bed. It's barely even five. He went to bed maybe two hours ago, and that's being generous.

The effort to pull himself from bed is almost Herculean, and John lays on the floor for a long moment. It's nice down here. Cool. But someone's stuffed their dirty socks beneath their bed and in the damp dewy morning the smell finds each of John's nostrils so perfectly he almost retches as he sits up—only manages not to because he doesn't want to wake the guys.

With that thought in mind, it's with as little groaning and puking as possible that he stuffs his feet into socks into boots; finds his jacket and tosses it over his undershirt. This may not be his jacket. It fits a little strange around the shoulders but—it'll do. He thinks if he tried to read the name stitched into the breast he really would throw up.

The door doesn't creak as he nudges it open, because they oil that shit like it's the goddamn—well, army. John shuts it behind him with a click. The source of the sound he discovers just around the corner, right outside the window his bed butts up against. Some fucking guy is skipping at five in the goddamn morning.

“Hey,” John tries, but the singing must’ve laid his voice right out last night because it sounds and feels raspy as anything. He presses his hand hard to the base of his throat. “Hey. What are you—Buck?”

Because the guy turns round on John’s second attempt at a greeting, and the light is so low since it’s five in the goddamn morning, but with his blonde hair slicked back like that and the shadow cutting against the line of his cheekbone he looks so much like one of John’s pals from back home he has to do a double take to make sure it’s not actually him.

“Can I help you?” It’s not. The tired-sounding drawl that spills from the guy’s mouth cements the fact, but still—John’s thrown. His head’s still spinning from the booze and now it feels like he’s looking at a ghost, never mind the real Buck’s back home in Wisconsin. “Hey. Buddy. Maybe you should go back to bed.”

“Yeah, well maybe I’d like to.” John stuffs his hands in his pockets. “If some crazy cadet wasn’t skipping outside my goddamn window.”

It’s hard to tell in the light but John thinks that maybe the guy looks contrite. He tucks the skipping rope a little further behind his back, at least, and scuffs his shoe into the grass.

“Sorry,” he says, and his accent elongates the word. Eats it up and spits it out different. “I didn’t think it was that loud.”

“Yeah, well.” John takes his hands from his pockets. Then he crosses his arms because they feel strange at his sides. “You weren’t, not really. It’s just I was awake, and it’s hard getting back to sleep with you out here.”

The guy nods. “I get it. I’ll put it away.” Maybe the tiredness in his voice isn’t all Midwest.

“Hey, Buck.” The name slips out without John’s permission. “Maybe you should get some sleep, too.”

“Not my name,” says not-Buck, but there’s enough light for John at least to see that the guy’s smiling. He wanders back to barracks, slinging the rope round his shoulders as he walks. John goes back to bed and despite the headache, sleep finds him quick enough.

It doesn’t become a routine, mainly because some mornings John will

sleep right through it. Not-Buck was right—the skipping ain't all that loud. But John's never been an easy sleeper, even as a kid. Always wakes in the night for no reason, breathless, sometimes, like he's just had a nightmare, only he never remembers what happened. It's one habit even the army couldn't break him from, though he's gotten better now at willing himself back asleep.

Only when he wants to, of course. When he wakes a few days later it's just after four-thirty, and there's a familiar sound right outside his window. John puts on his actual jacket this time, not Pete's grabbed by mistake. He's awake enough to do up his laces before trotting out into the dark.

"What'll you do if you break your ankle?"

Not-Buck snorts quietly, barely audible over the sound of the rope, and continues to skip. "I just won't break my ankle."

"Oh, really? Not even if I—"

John's barely even stuck his foot out to intercept the rope before not-Buck neatly sidesteps him. The rope comes to what must be a smarting halt against his calves. "Clearly you haven't thought about what *you'll* do if you break your ankle," he says dryly.

"Kick Hitler in the balls with my good leg," John replies. "Obviously."

"Oh, obviously." Not-Buck squints, probably trying to get a proper look at him in the darkness. "I didn't wake you this time, did I?"

"I was awake already."

"Alright. Good." He keeps squinting at John. "Can I help you, then?"

"What's your name?" John asks, instead of answering. He's glimpsed him a couple times in the days since their last early morning meeting, a head of perfectly-kept blonde hair. But something had held John back from approaching him then; like in the daylight, it would somehow be different.

"Surprised you don't know." A pause, in which something rustles in the grass a little ways away. "Bucky."

"You know who I am?"

Not-Buck rolls his eyes. The whites are visible in the darkness. "I don't

think there's anyone here who doesn't."

"Well." John's not sure what to say to that. "It's John, anyway."

"How do you get Bucky from John?"

He shrugs. "By accident." That makes the guy laugh.

"Well, alright. Gale Cleven. Not whatever it is you called me the other night."

"Buck?"

"You called me… you?"

"No." John shakes his head. "I'm Bucky. You're Buck."

"I'm Gale."

"Sure, okay." It feels some kind of way to needle this guy, even at four-thirty in the morning. "How come I have the feeling you won't go to bed even if I tell you to?"

It's hard to tell in the dark but John's pretty sure Not-Buck—Gale—Buck raises his eyebrows. "Tell me again when you've got stripes on your arm. Then maybe I'll listen."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Buck."

Another hard-won huff of laughter. "I never do. John."

The skipping starts up again before John's even closed the door. He leans his forehead up against the wood, the sound muffled now, for just a second before getting back in his bunk. The methodical *whip, thump* continues, clearer than John's head's been all night.

They do get together in daylight eventually. Randolph isn't all that big. They're lumped together on two drills, three, four. John takes up a permanent place opposite Buck in the mess hall. The other guys are mystified for a while by the nicknames but soon start calling them 'the two Buckies', despite Buck's protests.

"My name's *Gale*."

"And mine's John. Suck it up, buttercup."

He learns Buck's accent comes from South Dakota by way of Wyoming —not quite the pure Midwest he'd thought. That he liked physics in school and had never been on an airplane before signing up for the Air Force; that he has a dog named Honey and a sweetheart named Marge back home. That he's a devil in the cockpit and doesn't smoke or drink; that he skips outside John's bunk window almost every morning without fail, unless they've been on a drill the night before. Sometimes even then. John's own sleep is spotty—he wonders if Buck's getting any at all.

He'll join him, most mornings if he wakes and hears the rope scything the air outside. It gets so hot by mid-July he doesn't bother with his jacket, or his shoes as he meets Buck out on the grass that's either crunchy and dry beneath his feet, or uncomfortably damp if a summer rain passed in the night. Buck wears his trainers, same as always. It's so hot some mornings his tags stick to his chest as he jumps. John's own feel slicked in a permanent layer of sweat.

This one morning it has to be almost ninety already. Five in the morning and ninety degrees. If there wasn't a war on John would say that this was hell. The grass is sticky with humidity when he steps out onto it, and somehow Buck's gotten good at hearing the soundless creak of the door because he greets John quietly with a, "morning," before he's even clicked it closed.

"Notice you left off the 'good' there."

Buck skips a few more rounds then halts. "It's hot," he shrugs.

"It's *hot*, he says." John drops down on the grass. He'll regret the wet clothes later but right now he'd rather be anything other than upright.

To his surprise, Buck joins him. "Should I say something else?"

"How 'bout, 'go to sleep, Bucky. You look like hell.'"

Buck breathes in, then out. John doesn't turn his head but he can feel Buck shift his gaze onto him, that strong, steady blue he hadn't noticed the few times they'd met out here in the dark, but that he can't not think about now he knows it's there. "Go to sleep, Bucky," he says. "You look like hell."

"Right back at you."

John can definitely feel Buck roll his eyes. He shifts back on his hands in the grass, tips his head up toward the sky. It's overcast, no stars to

be seen, the cloud cover probably responsible for the bead of sweat currently making its treacherous path down the small of his back. He'll never tire of looking at the sky, he thinks. It's different all the time. Down here, up there; day, night. As if they can hear his thoughts, the clouds shift minutely overhead. They're heavy grey pendulums at this time of the morning, desperately trying to keep the sun at bay.

John can understand. He'd linger longer in these moments too, if he could.

"Marge wrote," Buck says finally, breaking the silence John didn't realise had settled over them. "Billy Draper asked her out."

"Shit." The grass prickles under John's palms. "She deck the bastard?"

Another eye roll. "No, John, she didn't punch Billy. She told him she had a sweetheart, thank you very much, and was waitin' on him and the war."

"Well…" John searches for the right thing to say. "Okay. That's what's got you looking like hell?"

"No. I don't know." Buck sighs. He kicks the grass, a move so uncharacteristic something jumps at the base of John's throat. "Just the thought of her waiting, I guess. Billy's not a bad guy. If he can be there for her, now, when I don't know if I'll ever…"

"Jesus. Hey." This—this John can do. He's talked many a man in his cups out of a spiral. Shouldn't make a difference Buck's stone cold sober—hell, maybe it'll make John's job easier. The only person he has to fool is himself. "Marge loves you, Buck." He swallows. "Gale. That kinda love… who cares if you gotta wait for it? And you know… war's still a ways away. Could be over before you know it."

Another long exhale. John listens for the shake he thinks might be there but can't find it. Maybe Buck's just that good at getting himself squared away. "Sure, Bucky," he says, after a long moment when John thinks that maybe he's just going to say nothing at all. "Thanks." He puts a hand on John's knee to lever himself back to his feet. It's warm and huge on John's bare skin and he can feel it, the rest of the morning, until the rain finally comes that afternoon and washes everything clean.

Their last day at Randolph is John's twenty-fifth birthday. He's not sure how Buck finds out but he wakes in the early morning as usual. When he goes outside it's to find Buck standing there, not skipping, with a spare jump rope in hand.

"Come on, like you haven't thought about it," he smiles, pearly white in the darkness, throwing John the rope without warning so that he fumbles to catch it. "I heard it's meant to help old age."

"Like I don't fly *circles* around you, Cleven—"

And then they're off. They have to keep it quiet, but they're used to that. John works to match Buck's pace, so instead of two discordant *whip, thumps* there's a single, louder sound. He lands heavier in the grass than Buck, though, and his palms start to sweat against the grip. He's out of breath quicker than he'd hoped for and bends over, hands on his knees.

Buck's rope stops and he comes close, smelling like sweat. "I was kidding about the old man thing," he says. "…should I get a medic?"

It's with a surprised "oof!" that John manages to tackle Buck into the grass. "You're the one who'll need a medic," he growls, but puts nothing behind his grip and Buck breaks it with little effort. They lie back in the grass, panting. There'll be stains all over John's shirt. He tells Buck as much, who just laughs again and shoves him.

They subside in the grass after a while. John can feel dawn threatening to break on the horizon. He closes his eyes, to keep it at bay just a little longer. It's when he has his eyes closed that Buck lets out a quiet breath and asks, "you got a girl back home?"

"What?"

The question is so abrupt John has to sit up, and the sudden movement makes his head spin. Buck follows him. The sky is bright enough that John can make out every detail of the expression on his face; he'd really rather not. "What the hell, Buck? You know I don't."

"I know, I just." Buck shrugs. He looks, all of a sudden, very young. They're four years apart until Buck turns twenty-two in December and John feels every day of it. "I guess I just wondered, what you'd be doing back home is all. On your birthday."

"What's today, Sunday?" Buck nods. "Mass, I guess. Mom'd cook something up. It wouldn't be anything that special, Buck. I got no—I

got no girl to spend it with." The words, though true, taste like a lie. In real, honest, 4F truth, John would've gone to mass on his birthday and eaten Christ's body and drank Christ's blood. He would've knelt on the hard wooden floor of their small chapel and dug his thumbnails into his forehead as he bent his neck to pray. He would've had lunch with his mom and his sisters and his family, made his excuses for the afternoon, and found Joey Brooks down by the part of the lakeshore they used to play at as kids. They weren't kids anymore. John would end up on his knees one way or another, Christ's name spilling from his lips.

He wonders what Buck would say if he told him any of that. If he told him all of it. If he said, "Buck, sometimes, I'll close my eyes to think of a broad and I land on you."

If he said, "Buck, we ain't even seen the war but you're already the best part of it."

If John was as selfish as everyone seems to think he is, maybe he'd do it. Maybe he would've, if he was Buck's twenty-one, stupid and cocksure. Those four years feel all the heavier.

Buck's gotta be reading his mind or something, because the next thing out of his mouth is, "I'll be twenty-five in '43. Think there'll still be a war on?"

"Nah," John says. Maybe a little cocksure, still. "'43 you'll be back home with Marge. Hell, maybe I'll come visit."

Buck knocks their knees together. "We'd like that." The pronoun curls, sour like bad wine, in the hollow of John's throat. He clears it to shake it loose and elbows Buck back into the grass.

They bunk together at Kelly, which both changes everything and nothing. Buck doesn't skip right outside John's window anymore but some mornings he'll wake John up as he's slipping from his bed, jump rope in hand. The first time it happens, John says something completely intelligible, like, "wuzzit?" and Buck just laughs, so quietly John might've dreamed it. He definitely dreams the hand Buck presses to his forehead. "Go to sleep, John," he says, and they're the same goddamned rank but John obeys him anyway.

It doesn't always happen like that. Sometimes John will wake with an awareness that something is wrong; he'll look to his right and see

Buck's empty bunk, and will be toeing on his shoes before he can even begin to wonder when *Buck's here* and *everything's fine* became the same thing in his head. Sometimes he'll wake up with Buck, who tells him every time to go back to sleep but who never touches his forehead again. John only listens some of the time. He likes those mornings best, because he can stand in the dark and watch Buck start with an end of the jump rope in each hand. He always takes a breath before whipping the rope up over his head, and it's always measured and calm. He never says yes to the flask John will sometimes bring with them outside, to ward away the cold that starts to creep back in come October. To ward away other things, sometimes.

John meets Marge when the both of them have a weekend pass and she's managed to make her way to Texas. She is beautiful, blonde and charming, the kind of girl John would've imagined perfectly for Buck if he'd ever wanted to try. She fits beneath the curve of Buck's arm like she belongs there, and laughs at all John's jokes.

He has a lot to drink that night.

She and Buck try to set him up with a girl at the bar, but it's just John's luck she's a broad he'd hung out to dry not one month ago. Her mouth is a straight line when it's just her and John alone and in lieu of an apology, he offers her his whiskey. She downs the double in two seconds flat and stomps on his toes on her way to the ladies'. He can't quite face Buck and Marge back at the table, though he can feel Buck's eyes on him as he slips outside. The back alley is quiet, the sky for once unclouded and clear. He unbuttons to piss in the corner, jaw cracking around a yawn, and watches as two shadows right down the end of the lane make a rustling sound then lie still. The clear sky offers an unfortunate beam of moonlight, that illuminates two sets of broad shoulders in uniform and no skirt in sight.

It's none of his business. John's drunk. He's drunk and doesn't know what he saw. He lets his eyes skitter away, find crevices in the dirty brick; does himself up once he's finished and walks back inside, making sure to close the door firmly behind him. Buck and Marge are right where he left them.

"Give the lady a dance, Buck, c'mon."

Marge laughs, soft and pretty. "I appreciate the gesture, John. But Gale here has two left feet."

"They missed that in the physical." Buck meets his eyes, raises an

eyebrow. John's head swims with booze. He holds out his hand to Marge and says, "my lady," like he's Sir Lancelot and she's Guinevere and Buck Cleven the golden-haired king.

"Oh, I—" And she puts a hand to her chest, looking back towards Buck, who nods like he means it, and smiles like he doesn't.

"Promise I won't step on your toes," John says. He's really not sure who he says it to.

Him and Buck are promoted together, and Kelly feels different after that. Like maybe 2nd lieutenants aren't meant to sneak out in the small hours of the morning, to watch their best friends carve invisible circles in the air with an army-issued jump rope, and want so bad they feel sick from it, and blame it on the drink.

John blames a lot on the drink. He always has. Hitler was probably drunk when he declared war. John can count on one hand the number of important decisions he's made sober, and they've all been made up in that fort. When he's not drinking, when he's not flying, there's nothing but him and his thoughts—thoughts that have been so loud recently, sometimes whiskey can't even drown them out.

He knows Buck's noticed, though the guy's never said anything. In either encouragement or judgement—John's not sure which would be worse. Their early mornings together become rare, and out there in the five o'clock dark John feels stripped bare by the cold November breeze. He wondered what Buck would do when winter finally came round, when the grass frosted overnight and it became too damn cold to leave your bed until you had to. He gets his answer, just before Christmas, when he wakes to find Buck still asleep in the bed next to him, blanket pulled up round his ears and looking so much like a damn kid John's eyes sting with it.

He eases the jump rope from Buck's footlocker without waking him and skips 'til he can't feel the cold. For the first time since the damn war started, Buck doesn't join him outside.

Buck turns twenty-two and five days later it's 1941. The States aren't in the war yet but they're delivered news from the front regardless. Those poor RAF bastards, John thinks, and then, right on the heels of that thought: we're next. If FDR ever gets off his ass and declares, that

is.

As it is, they're stuck in a kind of limbo. There's only so many drills and practice flights and nav training and first aid and calisthenics and dawn fucking reveille a guy can take with nothing on the other end of it. Thank God for the weekend pass, is all John has to say. He's a local in San Antonio's bars by now, and drags Buck along as often as the other man lets him. Which is often. For someone who doesn't drink, Buck sure likes hanging around the stuff.

John doesn't let himself wonder about anything else Buck might be sticking around for.

Marge doesn't come down again, but the letters are prolific, and Buck's given leave to visit her in Wyoming for two weeks in the spring. John has the same time off. It still feels like winter in Manitowoc and Joey's up and enlisted, the bastard, so there's no one to kill his time with but his mom.

It could be worse, John thinks, as he kneels in the cold dirt, weeding out the winter rot in her garden. She brings him cups of tea and kisses him on the forehead as he works, and he thinks, yeah, it could be worse. I could be in the war already.

A letter arrives for him, two days before he's set to leave, and it's in handwriting so familiar John's whole heart feels like it's going to crawl out from his chest.

Bucky, Marge writes. *Gale told me you had the same leave as him and I thought a surprise letter might do the trick of cheering you up, with it coming to a close! I hope this gets to you on time but if not, I trust your mother to pass it along to you at base. Gale's told me she's a wonderful cook. I hope you've enjoyed your two weeks of home-cooked meals, and not whatever passes for food in the Army! I know Gale has, though between you and me—I'm not the greatest chef.*

Gale doesn't know I'm writing you, because when he's not with me he's with his family or going on these awfully long walks I have no idea how he can stand. I suppose you're trained for that. He doesn't talk a lot about what goes on at Kelly Field, says it's boring, nothing worth writing home about—but when he does share something, it is always about you. I am so very grateful and indebted to you, for being there with him when I can't.

I am sure we will meet again soon. Tell your mother hello from me. In gratitude,

Marjorie Spencer.

He supposes it's a small mercy she's not signed it 'Marjorie Cleven'. John shows the letter to his mom as instructed, who reads it over and clicks her tongue against her teeth and pats John on the head where he's sitting at the kitchen table like she used to do years ago. "She seems lovely," is what she settles on, folding the letter back into three and sliding it neatly inside its envelope. "Though you haven't mentioned this 'Gale' to me, John."

He clears the lump from his throat. "It's Buck. Gale's—Buck."

"Ah." She ruffles his hair again. "Buck and Bucky. You must make quite the pair."

John loves her more than anything in the world in this moment. "We try," he gets out, and retreats back into the garden, where the weeding is done and the grass is mown and there's nothing at all left to do, not really, except lie there and look at the sky.

Buck beats him back to base by a matter of hours. He's laid out on his bunk, arms crossed behind his head and eyes closed, because this is technically their last day of leave and there's nowhere else they need to be.

John drops his kit on the bed and tamps down a smile when the noise startles Buck, who blinks awake quickly then rubs his eyes. "Oh, did I wake you?"

"Ass," Buck murmurs, tiredly, swinging his legs over the side of the bunk to sit up. "How was home?"

"Cold." John opens his bag. Marge's letter is stuffed somewhere inside; he couldn't bring himself to leave it behind. "How was Marge?"

Even with his back turned, John can hear the way Buck's mouth curls around a smile as he says, simply, "happy."

"Even with your ugly mug hanging 'round?"

"Yeah, yeah."

They settle back into an easy rhythm at Kelly. John feels a little dried out, mostly because his mom's a prison warden when it comes to

booze so he's gone two whole weeks on a single flask of malt. He starts sleeping better, which is embarrassing, because isn't alcohol meant to help with that? But his head's clearer, regardless. He keeps Marge's letter stashed in his footlocker and chases the same words round and round, dizzying circles of *being with him when I can't*. He's afraid to open up the letter and read it again, in case the words have changed.

Buck takes up the jump rope again, though with less frequency than before. Once, maybe twice a week now. Some of the other guys have cottoned on to their early mornings out on the grass, but they're neither as demented as Buck or lovesick as John so even if they do wake up to the two of them sneaking out before five, they fall back asleep quick enough. John's not sure what he'd do if anyone else joined them. Buck's distracted enough by the rope that it doesn't matter what John's face is doing while he watches, so long as he's sorted it out by the time the skipping stops.

"Why the hell do you do it, anyway?" he asks one morning, early May and nearing summer, though the mornings stay cool enough. "Not like you need the exercise, Buck."

Buck manages to shrug while skipping, which is a feat unto itself. He says, between beats, "grew up—with it."

"And I grew up Catholic. Look where that got me."

Buck laughs, which trips him up. He stops the rope to avoid falling over and tips his head toward John, considering. "Aren't you still? You said you go to church."

"*Mass*," John corrects. "Heathen. And… I don't know. Maybe. I go when I'm home, but it's not like, you know." The words shuffle and buzz around his early-morning brain. "It's not like I'm sinless, is it? There's things about me that the church… I don't know. I just think it's easier, not to force it. When stuff starts to drift apart."

His heart feels two sizes too big and all the way down in his boots. Buck's no idiot. There's only so many things John could mean. Except —

"You mean the drinking?" Buck asks gently. "C'mon. Wine's in communion, ain't it?"

—maybe he's just that naïve. Maybe he's just that—normal.

“Yeah,” John says tiredly. “That’s what I mean.”

“John—”

“Hey, I’m gonna hit the hay. Reckon I can get my full thirty minutes.”

“John,” Buck says again. “Bucky.”

He waves it away; feels, more than ever, the absence of that liquid courage. “I’m serious, alright—”

“So’m I.” Buck’s hand, around his wrist. His palm is still warm from the jump rope and John can feel the calluses of war on his skin. “Bucky. C’mon.” His voice trips around the words, drapes them in honey. “You *can* talk to me.”

“That’s the thing, Buck.” As John turns to face him, Buck’s arm holding his own raises, like he’s spinning John round in a dance. He lets go, and John’s falls with a thump to his side. He has to memorise this moment: the blue of Buck Cleven’s eyes. The way his eyebrows are raised just the slightest amount and creased neatly down the middle. His open mouth, the day-old scruff on his jaw. The sweat patches at his collar and under his armpits, the way he’s markedly shorter than John when they’re stood like this, John raised up on a stair, Buck’s feet on solid ground. “That’s the thing,” he says again. “All we do is talk.”

This close, he can see the way Buck swallows: lips pressed together, a firm bob of his Adam’s apple. “What else is there?” he asks quietly.

“C’mon, Buck,” John echoes back at him. He doesn’t have to say: you know. Buck is, after all, no idiot.

He opens his mouth. Closes it again. Opens it to say something so gentle John can’t bear it. “Don’t,” he says, over the top of him. “Just—let me go to bed. Please.”

Buck takes a step back. It feels as far as Lake Michigan. Stood on the edge of it you can’t even try to see the other side. “I’ll see you,” is what he says, and John thinks tiredly: you already do.

It’s summer again before they know it, and Texas drips a long line of sweat down John’s body no matter which way he moves. Him and Buck aren’t talking. Not in the way that matters, that is—not in that

quiet, five AM dark. In the daylight, under the sweltering Texan sun, you'd be hard pressed to tell anything was wrong between them. They fly together, eat together, drill together, sleep together, in bunks so close John could reach out and touch Buck in the bed next to him, if he wanted. They drive into San Antonio together. John kisses a different broad each night and pretends he doesn't have his eye on Buck in the corner the whole damn time, chewing his damn toothpick, drinking his damn seltzer. Composing damning letters to Marge in his head, for all John knows. For all Buck tells him.

Hitler invades the USSR. They hear about it in the mess, over cups of what passes as coffee here. The war seems suddenly so much closer, though it isn't, not really. Buck locks eyes with him over their half-eaten scrambled eggs and for a moment John forgets about all of it. The war, the fight—if that's what it was. Marge, waiting in Wyoming. It's all so far away.

Then Turner jostles him with his elbow and it all comes flooding back.

In September, the leaves already starting to brown, Buck wishes him a happy birthday while they're getting dressed at their bunks. The other guys give him shit for being so old, even though Turner's already twenty-six. Maybe it makes them feel better, on the anniversary of Britain getting the shit bombed out of them, maybe at the exact same time he and Buck were lying in the grass last year. He'd thought about kissing Buck, then. He'd wanted to kiss him while children were dying, and God help him, he still does.

"Almost thirty now," Mac teases, and Buck's laughing, and it's been a while since John heard it. Months, maybe, since the real thing.

He takes his time doing up his boots, fumbling the laces, playing up his age and letting the rest of the guys leave for mess without him.

Buck lingers.

"You'll be drinking the swill at the bottom of the pot," John warns, and Buck smiles, shrugs one shoulder.

"I'll live."

John stands. They look at each other. It feels as though Buck sees right through him.

"John," he starts, "are we—"

“We’re fine, Buck.” He crowds the longing from his heart and focuses on the one thing from Buck he can have: his trust. “Really. Promise.” On impulse, he sticks out his hand. “Shake on it?”

(“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Buck.”

“I never do.”)

Buck takes it. He doesn’t hesitate. “Promise,” he says.

John makes himself believe it.

End Notes

Some historical notes:

- Buck and Bucky were flying cadets together at Randolph and Kelly Fields, Texas. I took the exact dates of their location and promotions from here
- Bucky's birthday is 8 September which is pretty much smack bang the anniversary of the Blitz (technically 7 September but let me have this), Buck's birthday is 27 December (Christmas baby!!)
- Bucky really did have sisters which I wrote before looking it up I guess he just exudes that energy
- "Turner" is Ollen Turner who was a cadet and 2nd lieutenant with the buckies

I haven't read the book yet, so am sorry for anything that majorly transgresses/contradicts canon. But also, I'm not writing history here (says the historian)

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